

William Tyndale believed that people in England should be able to read religious books - especially *The Bible* - in their own language. Sixteenth-century leaders of the Church vehemently disagreed. So did the King of England - Henry VIII - and so did English law:

In England, however, under the 1408 Constitutions of Oxford, it was strictly forbidden to translate the Bible into the native tongue. This ban was vigorously enforced by Cardinal Wolsey and the Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, in an attempt to prevent the rise of English 'Lutheranism'. The only authorised version of the Bible was St Jerome's Latin translation, known as the 'Vulgate', made in the fourth century and understood only by highly-educated people.

A scholar fluent in eight languages, Tyndale came to believe that the teachings of church leaders were not always consistent with the Bible. Furthermore, he wondered what good it was for people to hear Biblical readings and church liturgies in Latin when the only language they understood was English. Tyndale decided he would translate the New Testament into English.

Like-minded people supported Tyndale's efforts. Working in secret, often outside his own country, he published his *New Testament* - today worth millions of dollars - in 1525. Many of the poetic phrases he used in his translation - "let there be light," "the apple of his eye," "the powers that be" and "eat, drink and be merry" - are still used today.

Not long thereafter, he was "befriended" by Henry Phillips, a traitor who had always planned to betray Tyndale. After he was arrested in Belgium, near Antwerp, Tyndale was long-imprisoned, ill-treated then executed. His alleged crimes were disagreements with the Church's teachings and his English-Bible translations.

Just before he died, Tyndale prayed that God would "open the eyes" of Henry VIII, thereby allowing people in England to have access to their own Bibles translated into their own language. Soon thereafter, that is exactly what happened.

This clip - a highlights trailer from "God's Outlaw - The Story of William Tyndale" - dramatizes key events in Tyndale's life. The following passages, from various biographies, also provide background about this strangled-then-burned-at-the-stake martyr who remains an important historical figure in the English-speaking world. Where, for example, did he work?

On the southern slopes of the Cotswolds was a large house, the Manor House of Little Sodbury, commanding an extensive view of the Severn Valley ... Here lived the family of Sir John Walsh ... When Tyndale left Cambridge [he had earlier studied at Oxford where, at age 20, he took a Masters Degree in 1515], Sir John Walsh asked him to come to Little Sodbury to educate his children and act as a private tutor to his family. Tyndale was now about twenty-five. (William Tyndale, by J.R. Broome, page 5.)

Already disagreeing with priests, Tyndale once had an argument with churchmen who believed the Church's teachings were more important than the Bible:

"I tell you," said a priest, "the Scriptures are a labyrinth, a conjuring book, wherein everybody finds what he wants." "Alas," replied Tyndale, "... they are an obscure book to you, a thicket of thorns where you only escape from the briers to be caught in the brambles." "No," exclaimed another priest, "Nothing is obscure to us; it is we (the Church) who give the Scriptures, and we who explain them to you."

Replied Tyndale, "Do you know who taught the eagles to spy out their prey? Well, the same God teaches His hungry children to spy out their Lord and trace out the paths of His feet and follow ... And as for you, far from having given us the Scriptures, it is you who have hidden them from us; it is you who burn those who teach them and if you could you would burn the Scriptures themselves." (William Tyndale, by J.R. Broome, pages 5-6.)

The British Library tells us that Tyndale believed the Church should not have such great power over the people:

Tyndale's mission was to make the Bible accessible to all. His translation was undeniably Lutheran in tone, replacing traditional words with new ones that argued a shift in the balance of religious power: 'Congregation' instead of Church; 'elder' in place of priest; and 'repentance' for penance.

Such an approach was inconsistent with the objectives of the church hierarchy. Tyndale would have to be punished, and Henry Phillips was selected to put the process in motion:

...Phillips must have been told to be extremely careful about secrecy ... Phillips was known to [Thomas] Cromwell as a persistent enemy of the State. (William Tyndale: A Biography, by David Daniell, page 368.)

Yet ... Tyndale's arrest was not under the jurisdiction of English law. He was arrested in Belgium, which (at the time) was part of the Holy Roman Empire. The ruler-in-charge was Emperor Charles V, not Henry VIII.

What was Tyndale's crime? For what was he arrested, imprisoned for so long, and eventually condemned to death? Phillips, [John] Foxe explains, had so ingratiated himself with the Court at Brussels by his declared hatred of King Henry that he was able to arrange for "the procurer-general, which is the emperor's attorney no less, to go with him, with other officers, to Antwerp, to arrest Tyndale. In other words, the charge was heresy, with not agreeing with the Holy Roman Emperor - in a nutshell, being a Lutheran. (William Tyndale: A Biography, by David Daniell, page 365.)

After spending more than a year in a cell, Tyndale was condemned to death as a heretic:

Early in August 1536, when Tyndale had been in his cell at Vilvorde for four hundred and fifty days, he was formally condemned as a heretic, degraded from the priesthood, and handed over to the secular authorities for punishment - that is, burning at the stake.

Although Henry Phillips had betrayed Tyndale, it was someone else who financially benefited from his execution:

This man was ... the procurer-general [the emperor's attorney], who had been Tyndale's ... accuser throughout. This officer's ruthlessness in the hunting down of heretics was encouraged by the fact that he received a proportion of the confiscated property of his victims. He also received a fee for his services: for the destruction of Tyndale it was £ 128, a large sum, and by a long way the highest payment to those involved in Tyndale's case. The holder of the position in those years was Pierre Dufief, a magistrate of evil reputation, widely known in the Low Countries for his cruelty.

He was assiduous, attending the private examinations of the prisoners, reading...the defendant's letters, arranging for victims to be tortured in search of fresh evidence, even sitting in the seat of justice and acting as a judge, sending prisoners to the flames. And always at his elbow, of course, was Henry Phillips. (Daniell, page 374.)

Tyndale decided to represent himself at his trial:

The biblical truths he had lived by for a dozen years of dangerous exile in poverty, which had driven his work of translating and writing with absolute dedication and total integrity (no wonder Henry Phillips hated him with such virulence) were not a matter of legal quibbles in an irregular court in a local spot in the Low Countries, but Scripture itself, the word of God Himself. (Daniell, page 376.)

Thomas Cromwell pleaded with the authorities in Belgium to release Tyndale to England. Nothing came of those requests, however. Tyndale was executed in October of 1536:

...early in the morning of one of the first days of October 1536, Tyndale was executed. Tradition has it that it was the sixth of the month, and the Anglican Church has always commemorated his death on that day. We have only Foxe's meager account of what happened. He was not burned alive, a fiercer punishment reserved for lesser creatures. He was strangled at the stake, and his dead body then burned.

Then, quoting Foxe, Daniell continues:

At last, after much reasoning, when no reason would serve, although he deserved no death, he was condemned by virtue of the emperor's decree ... and, upon the same, brought forth to the place of execution, was there tied to the stake, and then strangled first by the hangman, and afterwards, with fire consumed, in the morning at the town of Vilcorde, A.D. 1536: crying thus at the stake with a fervent zeal, and a loud voice, 'Lord! open the king of England's eyes.' (Daniell, pages 382-83.)

Although he was executed, Tyndale's legacy remains. Approximately 85% of the King James Version of the Bible follows Tyndale's translation.

See, also:

Video - Censorship at Work in the 16th Century: Burning People

Credits:

Clip from "God's Outlaw - The Story of Willian Tyndale" - 1986

Director - Tony Tew

Writer - Ben Steed

Starring:

Roger Rees - **William Tyndale**

Willoughby Goddard - **Cardinal Wolsey**

Keith Barron - **Henry VIII**

Stuart Harrison - **Henry Phillips**

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/William-Tyndale-Burned-for-Translating-the-Bible-into-English>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

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Media Stream



Cardinal Wolsey

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